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The Early Greek Concept of the Soul

Bremmer, Jan

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THE SOUL

MODERN SECULARIZATION has made the salvation of the soul a problem of diminishing importance, but the prominence in Western society of psychiatry and psychology shows that we still care for our *psychē*, or "soul." Our idea of the soul has both eschatological and psychological attributes, and the borrowing of the Greek word *psychē* for modern terms implies that the Greeks viewed the soul in the modern way. Yet, when we look at Homer's epics we find that the word *psychē* has no psychological connotations whatsoever. And in Homer the *psychē* may fly away during a swoon or leave the body through a wound, behavior now not associated with the soul. Do these differences then suggest that the early Greeks viewed the soul and human psychological make-up differently?

Indeed, the Greeks of Homer did not yet have "cognisance of any concept denoting the psychic whole, of any notion that might correspond to our word 'soul,' " as Bruno Snell has demonstrated in his epoch-making book *The Discovery of the Mind*.¹ Moreover, the Greeks were not the only people who had a concept of the soul unlike our own. The Anglo-Saxon concept of *sawol*, the linguistic ancestor of the mod-

¹ B. Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, 4th ed. (Göttingen 1975), English ed., *The Discovery of the Mind*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Oxford 1953). The summary of Snell's thesis is by H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley, London, and Los Angeles 1971) 9.

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ern English word "soul," lacked any psychological content,² and the evidence we will consider below shows that this absence is common in the soul beliefs of most "primitive" peoples. Thus an analysis of the early Greek concept of the soul may not only contribute to a better understanding of the development of the Greek, and, consequently, the modern Western mind, but can also clarify the so-called primitive notion of the soul.

Such an analysis may look deceptively simple at first. After all, what needs to be done? We collect words normally translated as "soul" or those associated with it, and so are led, presumably, to the Greek concept. The Greek material has been approached repeatedly in this manner. However, scholars have failed to ask some important preliminary questions. First, should the term "soul" be used at all? It is now generally recognized that the use of modern Western terminology to describe non-Western beliefs influences analysis since it assumes the existence among other peoples of the same semantic fields for modern words, and thus often implies a nonexistent similarity.³ In order to escape this danger a recent monograph introduced new terms to describe as exactly as possible the Oceanic concepts of the soul.⁴ Although the use of modern Western terms can be

² See, e.g., *Beowulf* 801, 852, 2820 etc. For the cognate Old High German *seola*, see G. Becker, *Geist und Seele im Altsächsischen und im Althochdeutschen* (Heidelberg 1964).

³ See H. Fischer, *Studien über Seelenvorstellungen in Ozeanien* (Munich 1965); J. G. Oosten, "The Examination of Religious Concepts in Religious Anthropology," in T. P. van Baaren and H.J.W. Drijvers (eds.), *Religion, Culture and Methodology* (The Hague and Paris 1973) 99-108. The problems arising from the use of such general terms as "soul" have been lucidly analyzed by the Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok, *Wittgenstein en Elias* (Amsterdam 1976).

⁴ Fischer, *Studien über Seelenvorstellungen*. In his terminology Fischer was followed by L. Leertouwer, *Het beeld van de ziel bij drie Sumatraanse volken* (Diss. Univ. of Groningen 1977). Leertouwer's results, as do Fischer's, correspond with those reached by Arbman and his pupils.

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misleading there are dangers inherent in the use of completely new terms. If every scholar introduces new terms to cover his specific area, from the Bongo-Bongo to ancient Greece, we will end up with a scientific Babel where communication is well-nigh impossible. For that reason I shall not introduce new terms for Greece but shall use the existing anthropological terminology. In so doing we shall, however, always have to be careful that we do not import into the Greek material shades of meaning that are typical of our own terms but not characteristic of the Greeks.

There is yet another problem to be faced. Scholars of the various soul beliefs have made extensive use of the insights of modern psychology in attempts to identify the experiences that moulded primeval man's ideas about himself. However, experiences are not events that take place in a historical vacuum. We recall and interpret our experience with the help of stereotypes of the particular society in which we live.⁵ Our own experience therefore may well be vastly different from those of primeval man. Although it is difficult to reconstruct those primeval experiences, we can sometimes trace developments of concepts by studying the etymology of the words concerned—for example, of *psychē*. In that case, however, we must beware of introducing into our texts the etymologies we have discovered. The fact that *psychē* once had a connection with breath does not necessarily mean that it has this meaning in Homer. Our point of departure must always be the assumption that the meaning of a word can only be derived from its use in the language.

Classicists seem to be in a more favorable position than many students of social anthropology. Between them and their sources there is not an informant who has his own

⁵ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford 1965) 24; K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth 1973) 104.

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interests and opinions or who is too young to be fully acquainted with his people's tradition. Nor do classicists have to rely upon the data of only one or two reports, as do scholars of soul belief in North America and North Eurasia. Classical students can study their subject directly from the texts and monuments and thereby establish meaning from a word's context or through its comparison with similar representations or texts.

Yet classicists also have particular difficulties stemming from the nature of the sources. The archaeological remains and reports are not always as informative as we might wish. The ancient authors have their particular bias and do not give systematic accounts of their soul belief. We often have to glean our information from records where information on the soul appears only incidentally. Sometimes a concept or rite in the period under investigation can only be compared with one in a later document. Such later examples cannot bring absolute confirmation of an interpretation, although they can enhance its probability. In some cases we have to compare a subject with rites or concepts from other cultures. Again, such a comparison cannot constitute absolute proof, but it may establish a certain degree of probability, depending on the number and nature of the parallels.

Modern research on the early Greek idea of the soul started in 1894 when Nietzsche's friend Erwin Rohde published his *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, a supreme scholarly achievement, written with such skill that it soon became a classic.⁶ Rohde

⁶ E. Rohde, *Psyche: Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, 2 vols., 1st ed. 1894, 2nd ed. (Freiburg, Leipzig, and Tübingen 1898), English ed., *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks*, trans. W. B. Hillis (London 1925). For surveys of anthropological studies of soul belief, see Å. Hultkrantz, *Conceptions of the soul*

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possessed a profound knowledge of the ancient Greek world and he developed his views in dialogue with contemporary anthropological and folkloric studies. He was much impressed with the ruling animistic theory that primitive man had conceived of the notion of the soul as a double of man when he observed that in dreams he could wander away.⁷ Rohde tried to harmonize this view with the Homeric text but, as he could not find any instance of the soul as double in Homer, he resorted to a fragment of Pindar:

In happy fate all die a death
That frees from care,
And yet there still will linger behind
A living image of life,
For this alone has come from the gods.
It sleeps while the members are active;
But to those who sleep themselves
It reveals in myriad visions
The fateful approach
Of adversities or delights.⁸

This fragment indeed illustrates the theory that in dreams the soul acts as a double, but Rohde did not bother to explain why this activity does not occur in Homer; neither did he find it necessary to continue his analysis of the words used for "soul." Like the great majority of his contemporaries, he was exclusively interested in the destination of the soul, and had no eye for the rich and varied Homeric psychological terminology. His interpretation was enthusiastically received by some and silently rejected by others, particularly

among North American Indians (Stockholm 1953) 15-35; Fischer, *Studien über Seelenvorstellungen*, 1-44.

⁷ H. Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. 1 (London 1876) 147-157.

⁸ Pindar fragment 131b Snell/Maehler, trans. W. Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* (Oxford 1947) 75. I have added the (corrupt) fragment 131a, see F. Graf, *Eleusis und die orphische Dichtung Athens in vorhellenistischer Zeit*, RGVV, vol. 33 (Berlin and New York 1974) 86.

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by the greatest classical scholar of that time, Wilamowitz,⁹ but it remained the starting point for all subsequent discussions. These discussions did not make much fundamental progress toward an eschatology of the soul, but they rightly stressed the difference between the soul of the living and the dead, and took into account the etymology of the various words studied.¹⁰ They did, moreover, advance our knowledge of the Homeric psychology of the soul, an advance culminating in Snell's demonstration that the early Greeks did not yet have a unitary concept of the body and mind.¹¹ Snell's analysis has been corrected, supplemented, and refined, but not superseded, by later scholars.¹² We still lack, however, a systematic approach that assembles all the

⁹ For Wilamowitz's estimation of Rohde's *Psyche*, see now A. Henrichs, "Der Glaube der Hellenen": Religionsgeschichte als Glaubensbekenntnis und Kulturkritik," in W. M. Calder III and H. Flashar (eds.), *Wilamowitz nach 50 Jahre* (Darmstadt 1983).

¹⁰ For the distinction, see W. F. Otto, *Die Manen oder von den Urformen des Totenglaubens* (Berlin 1923). G. Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin 1969) 436 suggests that Otto was the first to make this distinction, but this had already been done by A. C. Kruyt, *Het animisme in den Indischen archipel* (The Hague 1906) 2. For the etymology, see E. Bickel, *Homerischer Seelenglaube* (Berlin 1925).

¹¹ Snell, *Gnomon* 7 (1931) 74-86 had first developed his views in a review of his most important predecessor in the field of Homeric psychology, J. Böhme, *Die Seele und das Ich im homerischen Epos* (Leipzig and Berlin 1929).

¹² See R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge 1954); A. Lesky, *Göttliche und menschliche Motivierung im homerischen Epos* (Heidelberg 1961); H. Fraenkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*, 2nd ed. (Munich 1962), English ed. *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, trans. M. Hadas and J. Willis (Oxford 1975); M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Munich 1967) 193; A.W.H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* (London 1970); W. J. Verdenius, "Archaische denkpatronen (pt.) 2," *Lampas* 3 (1970) 98-113, esp. 101-107 and "Archaische denkpatronen (pt.) 3," *Lampas* 5 (1972) 98-121, esp. 98-104; Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 8-10; K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford 1974) 150-152.

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elements and accounts for all the factors determining the nouns for the different parts of what we usually associate with the soul.

Such an integral approach was first undertaken by the Swedish Sanskritist Ernst Arbman in an analysis of Vedic soul belief in India. He found that the concept of the soul (*ātman*, *puruṣa*) was preceded by a duality where the eschatological and psychological attributes of the soul had not yet merged. For Christian Scandinavia and classical Greece he arrived at the same conclusion. After these high cultures he proceeded to investigate "primitive" ones, where he found the same duality, although its presence had often been obscured by the concept of the soul held by the field investigators themselves.¹³

In his analysis Arbman distinguished between body souls endowing the body with life and consciousness and the free soul, an unencumbered soul representing the individual personality. The free soul is active during unconsciousness, and passive during consciousness when the conscious individual replaces it. It is not exactly clear where the passive free soul resides in the body. The body souls are active during the waking life of the living individual. In contrast to the free soul the body soul is often divided into several parts. Usually it falls into two categories: one is the life soul, frequently identified with the breath, the life principle; the other is the ego soul. The body soul, or several of its parts, represents the inner self of the individual. In the early stage of the development of Vedic soul belief the free soul and the body souls did not yet constitute a unity; later the concept of the Vedic free soul, *ātman*, incorporated the psy-

¹³ E. Arbman, "Untersuchungen zur primitiven Seelenvorstellungen mit besonderer Rücksicht auf Indien," pts. 1-2, *Le Monde Oriental* 20 (1926) 85-222 and 21 (1927) 1-185.

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chological attributes of the body souls, a development that occurred among a number of peoples.

Arbman's views have been elaborated by his pupils in two major monographs on the soul beliefs of North America and North Eurasia, confirmed by the studies of other scholars, and widely accepted by anthropologists.¹⁴ It seems reasonable to apply his method to the problem of Greek soul belief in order to establish its value for the study of archaic Greek soul belief. This comparative analysis will begin with the epic tradition, the earliest and richest source, that greatly influenced later ideas, and will then consider material from the period after the epic until about 400 B.C. when aspects of Greek soul belief occur that are not found in Homer. In this way we can hope to see as complete a picture as possible of Greek soul belief before the soul became the subject of systematic reflection by Plato and other philosophers. Arbman concentrated especially on the soul of the living, but his pupils also paid attention (albeit to a much lesser degree) to the soul of the dead, of animals, and plants! These aspects of the Greek concept of the soul will be compared to the discoveries of Arbman's pupils to enrich our understanding of them.

This analysis necessarily has a certain ideal character. The evidence comes from different places, and we simply do not know whether all the aspects of the Greek soul belief

¹⁴ See Hultkrantz, *Conceptions of the soul among North American Indians*; I. Paulson, *Die primitiven Seelenvorstellungen der nordeurasischen Völker* (Stockholm 1958); Å. Hultkrantz, "Seele," in K. Galling (ed.), *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen 1961) 1634-1636; H. Hohegger, "Die Vorstellungen von 'Seele' und 'Totengeist' bei afrikanischen Völkern," *Anthropos* 60 (1965) 273-339; B. G. Alver, "Conceptions of the living human soul in the Norwegian tradition," *Temenos* 7 (1971) 7-33; J. Lång, "The Concept of Psyche," *Acta ethnographica academiae scientiarum Hungaricae* 22 (1973) 171-197; J. G. Oosten, *The Theoretical Structure of the Religion of the Netsilik and Iglulik* (Diss. Univ. of Groningen 1976) 30-41.

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or of a rite can be found throughout the period under investigation and throughout Greece. There may well be local variants and developments that escape us because of the fragmentary nature of our sources. In addition since the records come mainly from the upper classes of Greek society, the ideas expressed there may not have been shared by the lower classes. The sources do not allow us to differentiate in this respect.

We discuss the material arranged as far as possible according to the categories defined by Arberman and his pupils, and then we compare the results with the concepts of Arberman described in detail at that point. In general the material will not be analyzed exhaustively but only so far as it is of interest for a better understanding of the Greek soul belief; the texts cited are offered by way of example. The analysis may seem somewhat dogmatic since in each case only a few examples are given as illustration, but for each term discussed an extensive bibliography is given to allow the reader to pursue the material at length.

This study then applies the model of "primitive" soul belief with its distinction between a free soul representing the individuality of a person and the body souls endowing a person with life and consciousness. Following this model *psychē* will be identified in the next chapter as corresponding with the free soul and terms connected with man's inner life such as *thymos*, *noos*, and *menos*, as corresponding with the body souls. Although the concept of *psychē* developed into the modern unitary soul, its "primitive" character can be discerned in the so-called shamanistic traditions and the early descriptions of dreams. An investigation of terminology in the last chapter will show that for the Greeks, as for many other peoples, the free soul of the living continued as the soul of the dead, although other manifestations of the deceased were also thought to exist. There was no uniform

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representation of the dead in an afterlife, neither did all the dead have the same status. An appendix will take up the question of the possible existence of a soul in plants and animals, and in a second appendix the wandering soul in Western European folktales will be discussed.

Finally, since the sources are fragmentary and hard to interpret; it may well be that others will be inclined to draw different conclusions from the material studied here. But I hope that in any case this archaeology of Greek anthropology will make a fresh start in the analysis of the early Greek concept of the soul.